

PROLOGUE

On Airing Dirty Linen

THIS BOOK began eight years ago, with a number of long conversations under the honey locust trees in the courtyard of The Runcible Spoon coffee shop in Bloomington, Indiana. Daphne, on leave from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, was spending the year as a fellow at Indiana University's Institute for Advanced Study and offered to be a visiting speaker for Women's Studies classes. Noretta was teaching a seminar on Concepts of Gender and Sexuality at the time and invited Daphne to lecture about her research on sex role reversals in utopian fiction. As we became friends, our conversations meandered from the political commitments of novelists to the social responsibility of scientists, from complaints about lazy students to cynical remarks about university administrators—the standard chitchat of academics, except for the fact that almost everything we talked about was informed by, or at least flavored with, ideas and analyses that had developed within contemporary feminism.

But there was another thread that ran through those early conversations. As we got to know each other better and spoke more frankly, we began to discuss our concerns about the direction in which Women's Studies programs and feminism in general appeared to be heading. At first, we tended to view the unpleasant little anecdotes we reported to each other—irregularities in the way programs

conducted their affairs or odd methodological turns in feminist research—as isolated excesses or local anomalies.

As the years passed and our conversations continued, usually long distance, first by post and then by electronic mail, it became increasingly clear to us that what we were really saying, if only we had the courage to admit it, was that many of the central tenets and favored practices of feminism within today's academy are seriously flawed. But it is one thing to convince yourself that the Empress has threadbare clothes and quite another to shout it in the streets, as the difficulties we experienced while we worked on this book demonstrated to us.

In many ways, ours was an unlikely collaboration. We were born on opposite sides of the globe; we have different computer preferences, sexual preferences, politico-economic philosophies, and disciplinary backgrounds, and, as we quickly discovered, quite different writing styles. But each of us in her own way has invested a great deal of intellectual and emotional energy in feminism and Women's Studies. We each identify strongly with the feminist movement. In criticizing certain aspects of feminism, we are therefore not only repudiating some of our own previous beliefs and practices but also jeopardizing friendships with many colleagues and allies. Even the people who basically agree with us often remarked during interviews how important it is not to criticize feminism in a way that would give legitimacy to the political and religious right. The old saying about not airing dirty linen in public kept popping up.

Nevertheless, in the end, we decided we should speak out about the troubling aspects of Women's Studies as we see them. Perhaps it was in part our feminist training that spurred us on. After all, does feminism itself not counsel women to refuse to be silenced by coercive ideological systems? Does feminism not tell us to criticize and dismantle traditions and institutions that harm women by impeding their development in all spheres, including—we would say, especially—the intellectual and moral? Does it not warn us about the costs of political expediency, and has it not encouraged women not to shy away from espousing positions that may be unpopular or mis-

understood? And is it not feminism itself that teaches us how difficult and also dangerous it is to try to keep dirty linen within the household precisely because the boundary between private and public is so porous?

We believe that it is feminists, not their opponents, who must speak out about contemporary feminism's tendency to turn into a parody of itself. Where did things go wrong? And why? Answering these questions is hard enough; it is even more difficult to suggest solutions. But just as naming and examining the problem was an important accomplishment of the women's movement in its early days, so, we are confident, it matters today that attention be paid to the harm done to contemporary feminism by the ideological policing and intolerance going on in its own ranks.

From our personal experience we knew that some programs, in their fervor to use the academy as a staging ground for the liberation of women, were not doing a good job of educating them. But what we did not know was how widespread and deeply rooted these failures were, nor how serious their adverse effects. To find out, we began our research in typical feminist fashion—by asking a variety of women to talk about their own experience in Women's Studies.

When we told colleagues in Women's Studies that we were doing research about problems within contemporary feminism, some assumed we were referring to "the backlash"—a pejorative that is today slapped onto any and every criticism of feminism and whose main function seems to be to shut down discussion. Others thought we would write about lack of administrative support for Women's Studies. When we said, no, we were dealing with internal difficulties, our colleagues' conjectures turned either to racism and other diversity issues or to doctrinal conflicts over pornography, postmodernism, psychoanalysis, and the like. But as we began to speak of "ideological policing," "intolerance," "dogmatism," we evoked a different kind of response—knowing looks and sighs, a host of non-verbal admissions that things were not quite right after all. These gestures, however, were routinely and rapidly followed by expres-

sions of concern about "horizontal hostility" (women criticizing other women), or about the possible appropriation by political enemies of any open critique of feminism.

It was only when we talked to some "exiles" from Women's Studies—colleagues who still considered themselves to be feminists and whose work and lives have been deeply marked by feminism, but who for one reason or another had withdrawn to other departments, or were contemplating such a move—that we found women who were prepared to admit the seriousness of the issues we were raising. Each of these women who has walked away, taken what we call "inner flight," or in other respects has become alienated from the enterprise of Women's Studies contributed a portion of the analysis we present here. Some complained to us of improper academic procedures or the tyranny of "consensus" in decision making; others were put off by personalistic and haphazard academic proceedings; still others resented the bullying tactics of militant students. Some felt that the pedagogy in many Women's Studies courses was thinly disguised indoctrination; others feared that the emphasis on "support" and "finding one's voice" threatened to turn Women's Studies classes into twelve-step programs or group therapy sessions. All expressed concern, disappointment, and unhappiness.

Academics are notorious complainers, and in every department and discipline one is apt to find faculty grouching about falling scholarly standards, undeserving colleagues, and students who are either too docile or too aggressive. But the tales we collected from women who had lost some or all of their confidence in Women's Studies stood out both qualitatively and quantitatively from the general background of academic grumbling. Furthermore, there was a pattern to the complaints that transcended local peculiarities and personality conflicts.

Again and again, women told us that they had long wanted to discuss their concerns but had felt isolated and hesitant to express opinions they knew could be dismissed as the experience of one disgruntled woman unable to thrive under the new feminist regime. Many of the women who were willing to talk with us were pained or

distressed. No enemies of feminism lurked among them. Instead, we found sincere and thoughtful individuals, providing accounts of troubling experiences and disappointed hopes.

Our inquiry is concentrated on feminism as it is practiced in Women's Studies at colleges and universities. The reasons for this focus are self-evident to us. First of all, the academy is the scene we know best and care most about. More important, we recognize it as the setting that has provided a fascinating and—we think—revealing testing ground for feminist principles and claims.

Women's Studies programs have enjoyed the substantive protections afforded by the principle, and indeed the reality, of academic freedom. It is, in our view, the existence of the essentially liberal value of academic freedom that has allowed Women's Studies programs to develop in the diverse ways in which we observe them today. But our own experiences and those of many colleagues with whom we spoke have led us to conclude that some programs now deny the very values that allowed them to come into being. If Women's Studies does not promote, indeed does not stand for, open inquiry, critical exploration of multiple perspectives (even threatening ones), and scholarship not tethered to the political passions of the moment, what is there to be said for its presence in the academy?

Academe is in many respects a sheltered arena in which ideas and persuasions can be developed and thrashed out largely unconstrained by the world outside. But feminist academic behavior is not "academic." Feminism in the lecture hall, seminar, or committee room provides us with a virtual laboratory in which to study in microcosm the likely effects of social changes, were they to be set loose in the larger society. If even in the relatively protected world of the academy feminist endeavors, controlled by feminists themselves, too often run aground, should we expect them to do any better in the world at large?

The academy is also, as it turns out, a highly visible stage, upon which feminism's excesses have been plain to see for some time now. We are not claiming that every single Women's Studies program

throughout the country displays the problems described in this book. But far too many do so for these matters to be buried or left unaided any longer. And this simple fact should be of major concern to feminists, wherever they are located. Important allies have already been lost. Too many among the first generation of feminists in the university, those who organized and fought for Women's Studies programs, are now profoundly alienated from these very programs and endeavors. More are on the verge of becoming disenchanted. Feminism cannot afford such a brain drain. Among women students—the next generation—"feminist" has already become a label many prefer to avoid. It is naive to imagine (or pretend) that this is all due to media malice and misrepresentation. Clearly, academic feminism must begin to acknowledge and address its considerable problems, or else shrink into an introverted and marginal sect.

A NOTE ON METHOD

Thirty women from around the country contributed their experiences and reflections to this work, in the form of lengthy and detailed taped interviews. Most of these women are or have been faculty members; some are or were students and staff members in Women's Studies programs. We have also utilized material offered to us from correspondence, memos, and journal entries, as well as communications from the International Electronic Forum for Women's Studies (WMST-List, run by Joan Korenman, the director of Women's Studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County), a rich source of information. While we have not conducted an exhaustive inventory of Women's Studies programs, everything we have learned convinces us that the voices heard in this book, and the problems discussed, are characteristic. Such a view is confirmed by the fact that many other women spoke to us of friends and acquaintances who had encountered similar situations, explaining why these individuals were not likely to be willing to talk to us.

In open-ended interviews (conducted between January and July,

1993) that lasted, on the average, three hours, we attempted to allow people to speak of their own experiences, their own hopes and expectations of feminism and Women's Studies programs, their own appraisals of the proper relation between educational and political commitments, their own pleasures and pains in the classroom and in their universities. Nearly every woman who figures in this book requested that her name, affiliation, and other identifying features be disguised. However alienated and disappointed these women (and we ourselves) felt, the desire not to embarrass colleagues and institutions continues to be strong, as is the reluctance to publicly acknowledge the failures of feminism in the academy.

We also note, with regret, that the desire for anonymity reflects some of the very problems this book aims to analyze: the tendency of feminism to stifle open debate and create an atmosphere in which disagreement is viewed as betrayal. We have honored all these requests and, for uniformity's sake, have incorporated many of our own accounts into the book in the same way.